



Benjamin Netanyahu: From Puppet Master to Puppet – but not yet beaten

Ahead of Israel's parliamentary elections, which must be held no later than October 27, 2026, FokusIsrael.ch will profile the country's key political leaders. We begin with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

By Jan Kapusnak 

Benjamin Netanyahu is Israel's [longest-serving](#) prime minister, with nearly nineteen years in office. He has led Likud for a cumulative twenty-seven years, making him the defining figure of Israel's largest right-wing party and the country's most experienced politician.

Likud used to be a [national-liberal](#), security-oriented party that championed free markets and limited state. However, Netanyahu transformed Likud into a party centered on himself, with his political survival placed above the national interest. It became more populist, illiberal and anti-institutional, polarizing society through culture-war battles and attacks on democracy while neglecting education, transportation and the cost of living.

The change was not only ideological. Likud, once a party of strong personalities and internal debate, became a party of loyalists where internal opposition can be politically fatal. Figures such as [Moshe Ya'alon](#), [Gideon Sa'ar](#), Moshe Kahlon, Dan Meridor, [Yoav Gallant](#) and [Yuli Edelstein](#) either left or were pushed aside. Ministers increasingly behave less like independent politicians than as his puppets.

Unfulfilled Promises

For decades, Netanyahu's brand rested on one promise: only he could protect Israel. He was "Mr. Security," the leader who claimed to understand Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran better than his rivals, while mocking former IDF chiefs such as Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot as weak or unfit to lead.

Then came October 7, 2023. The worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust happened on Netanyahu's watch. Hamas shattered the assumptions of military deterrence, intelligence superiority, border technology and Qatari-funded stability on which his security doctrine had rested.

Netanyahu promised "[absolute victory](#)" over Hamas, saying in February 2024 that Israel was "within reach" of it and that the war would be won in months. He also



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vowed to remove the threats from Hezbollah and Iran. Israel did inflict serious damage: Hamas was badly weakened, Hezbollah was hit hard, and Iran's missile program and nuclear facilities were damaged. But none of these threats was eliminated, and northern Israel in particular remained unsafe.

American pressure may have limited Israel's freedom of action, but that too weakened Netanyahu's narrative: he had long presented Trump as his closest ally and ultimate security guarantee. After the disputed memorandum with Iran, many Israelis felt betrayed; by July 2026, [only 28 percent](#) believed Trump acted mainly with Israel's security interests in mind.

Failure to Take Responsibility for October 7

Netanyahu's refusal to accept responsibility for October 7 became central to the 2026 election. Senior IDF and Shin Bet leaders took responsibility or [resigned](#); Netanyahu did not. Instead of supporting an [independent](#) state commission of inquiry, he and his coalition pushed for a [politically appointed](#) commission designed to dilute responsibility and shift blame backward – to [Oslo](#), the Gaza disengagement, the security echelon that Netanyahu's camp claimed had deliberately misled him, and the protesters against his judicial overhaul.

Netanyahu had suggested that the multi-front war would freeze Israel's most divisive domestic battles, but his government never abandoned the overhaul. It was presented as a correction of judicial activism: limiting the Supreme Court, weakening the attorney general and increasing political control over judicial appointments. Opponents saw it as an attempt to remove the checks and balances.

The danger was no longer theoretical. This week, Netanyahu's government said it would [ignore](#) High Court rulings that did not fit its ideological agenda, prompting President Isaac Herzog to warn that defying court decisions was a "[red line](#)." In a country without a written constitution, the crisis was especially serious.

This worldview hardened as investigations closed in on Netanyahu and his circle. Netanyahu has been on trial since 2020, involving allegations of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. He denies wrongdoing and calls the cases political persecution. His camp portrays judges, prosecutors, journalists, "leftists" and security officials as a hostile "[deep state](#)" determined to remove him.



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Other scandals added fuel to the fire. In “Qatargate,” close [Netanyahu advisers](#) – including Jonatan Urich and Eli Feldstein – were investigated over alleged ties to Qatari interests – while Doha mediated hostage and ceasefire talks with Hamas. In the “BILD leak affair,” classified intelligence about Hamas’s negotiating strategy was leaked to Germany’s BILD shortly after six Israeli hostages were murdered in Gaza. Feldstein was indicted, and Urich was later charged with leaking classified information with intent to [harm state security](#). Feldstein claimed the leak was meant to shape public opinion and reduce pressure on Netanyahu over the hostage talks, reinforcing the suspicion that the hostages were not his real priority.

Dependence on the Haredim and Far-Right

Netanyahu’s dependence on ultra-Orthodox parties is just as damaging. After years of war and reserve duty, the IDF needs more soldiers. Yet Netanyahu continues to protect Haredi draft exemptions, even after the Supreme Court [ruled](#) they lacked a legal basis – one reason the ultra-Orthodox parties share his hostility toward the court. Haredi anti-draft protests have repeatedly [blocked](#) roads and disrupted transport, angering many Israelis who were stuck for hours. His coalition advanced legislation to entrench the [special status of yeshiva](#) students and, in earlier versions, place Torah study on a level comparable to military service. For many Israelis who serve, pay taxes and carry the burden of war, the arrangement feels deeply unfair.

Netanyahu also legitimized the far-right, through annexation rhetoric and by bringing Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich from the margins into government. Their statements caused outrage in Israel and [abroad](#), while their influence over police and West Bank policy turned [settler violence](#) into a diplomatic and security liability. Netanyahu tolerated this because the far-right was essential to his coalition. When the problem became harder to ignore, he blamed the courts for being too lenient toward violent settlers.

Unpopular – but not yet beaten

All of this casts a shadow even over Netanyahu’s real achievements. He helped deepen Israel’s ties with India and expanded relations with parts of the Sunni Arab world through the Abraham Accords with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan.



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Netanyahu is deeply [unpopular](#) in Israel: a June Israel Democracy Institute poll found that 61 percent of Israelis did not want him to run again. Recent [polls show](#) Gadi Eisenkot's Yashar party, his strongest challenger, tying or even overtaking Likud – a powerful symbol, since Eisenkot is one of the former generals Netanyahu long dismissed.

Still, Israeli elections are won by coalition arithmetic, not by coming first. Netanyahu's bloc is [polling below](#) the 61 seats needed for a Knesset majority, but the opposition may also struggle to assemble one. The result could be another deadlock like 2019–2022. That is why Netanyahu remains dangerous: even weakened, he knows how to dominate the right, block alternatives and survive paralysis. The election is therefore about more than his future; it is about whether Israeli democracy can escape the system he built around his own survival.

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